



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **SOUTHERN IDAHO GROUND SQUIRRELS MAY BENEFIT FROM CONSERVATION MEASURES**

The southern Idaho ground squirrel, a federal candidate species that has experienced a significant decline in population throughout southwestern Idaho, may be receiving some extra help from its friends. Soulen Livestock Company, along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and the Governor's Office of Species Conservation is in the process of formalizing a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances which would implement conservation measures for the species over about 43,000 acres of Soulen Livestock's land in Washington and Payette Counties, Idaho.

The southern Idaho ground squirrel was identified as a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act in October, 2001. Southern Idaho ground squirrels are currently found in a 518,000-acre area in the Weiser River Basin. The species has been declining throughout its range since 1985. Conservation measures implemented on private lands are important for the long-term survival of the southern Idaho ground squirrel, since the species is largely dependent on private lands. Eighty-five percent of the known occupied ground squirrel sites are located on private lands, primarily ranches and farms; 12% of the species' occupied sites are federally managed by the Bureau of Land Management, and 3% of the sites are on lands managed by the Idaho Department of Lands.

The intent of the Candidate Conservation Agreement is to protect and enhance ground squirrel habitat and populations, and also to reintroduce ground squirrels into currently unoccupied suitable habitat in a manner that is consistent with Soulen Livestock's farming and ranching operations. The proposed term of the Agreement is 20 years. Under the Agreement, Soulen Livestock will not allow shooting, trapping or poisoning of ground squirrels, and will allow agency personnel access to the lands to conduct ground squirrel surveys. Soulen Livestock will allow previous southern Idaho ground squirrel reintroduction/translocation and monitoring efforts to continue. Habitat enhancement measures such as seeding, fertilizing, and prescribed burning will also be implemented through the Agreement. Under the Agreement, a permit would be issued to Soulen Livestock authorizing incidental take of southern Idaho ground squirrels as a result of Soulen Livestock's land use activities if the species is eventually listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Bob Ruesink, Snake River Basin Office supervisor, said, "These types of agreements are an excellent example of State and Federal agencies working in partnership with private landowners to further conservation of sensitive wildlife species."

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The Service has prepared an Environmental Assessment for approval of the Agreement and issuance of the permit. Under a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances, participating landowners can contribute toward reducing the need to list species by voluntarily implementing conservation activities on their property to benefit species that are proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act, or other sensitive species. These Agreements encourage private and other non-Federal property owners to implement conservation efforts, and to reduce threats to unlisted species by assuring them they will not be subjected to increased property use restrictions if the species is eventually listed under the Endangered Species Act.

The Service is requesting public comment on the proposed permit application, Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances, and Environmental Assessment. Copies of the documents for review or additional information may be obtained by contacting Dennis Mackey at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Snake River Basin Office, 1387 S. Vinnell Way, Room 368, Boise, ID 83709, (208) 378-5267, FAX (208) 378-5262. All comments must be received on or before April 22, 2002.

## FWS

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.